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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Prospects for the French Territory of the  
Afars and Issas

Peaceful decolonization of the French Territory of the Afars and Issas will not be easily achieved because of competing tribal and foreign interests. Considerable internal strife is likely in the coming months and there is a better than even chance that Djibouti could trigger armed conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia.

The territory's political fragmentation will be an important factor contributing to instability. No one leader or political faction is likely to mobilize a broad-based following. There will be much jockeying for influence and shifts in allegiance as various factions seek to improve their chances of controlling an independent government.

Paris recently announced its intentions to grant independence to the territory, but a date has apparently not yet been set. France at present is planning to transfer power to Ali Aref, an Afar and the current head of the territorial government. He will attempt to broaden his base of support, particularly among the Issas. Other moderate politicians will attempt to keep their distance from Aref and maneuver themselves into a position to assume leadership of the pro-French independence forces, if Paris decides to withdraw its support from Aref.

Paris could switch its support to someone else if Aref is unable to improve his weak political position or if he becomes too controversial. Paris might at some point conclude that another leader, even though willing to maintain close ties to France, would be less likely to be branded a stooge and less identified with Aref's old policy of discrimination against the Issas. A new administration might thus be better able to meet the challenge from contending elements in the territory.

Unrest has sharply increased since it became evident in mid-1975 that Aref intended to ask France for independence. We believe that demonstrations and violent incidents are

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likely to grow in frequency and seriousness as independence draws nearer. The ethnic groups and political factions in the territory have almost no experience in compromise politics or in working together. Existing animosities will provide fertile ground for exploitation by external sources. We believe that French security forces, as long as they are present or Paris is willing to commit them, will be able to prevent a total breakdown of order.

France's internal security role up to and following independence will be determined largely by the nature and extent of political violence. Civil disturbances or limited guerrilla warfare will not deter Paris from moving ahead with an independence timetable agreed on jointly with the local government. France, however, would not for long commit its forces in the face of widespread insurgency. The outbreak of large-scale guerrilla warfare would probably increase Paris' determination to find a face-saving arrangement allowing it to withdraw as gracefully as possible.

Ethiopia seeks an independent FTAI under a government that would guarantee Ethiopia's continued access to the port of Djibouti. Addis Ababa would probably fight to prevent Somalia or a pro-Somali government from gaining control of Djibouti. If a Somali-supported insurgency gained momentum, Ethiopia would probably respond with a conventional attack rather than attempt counter-insurgency operations. Ethiopia cannot count on any groups in the FTAI rallying to its side because its efforts to suppress its own Afars has alienated most Afars in the territory. Addis Ababa's political influence in the territory rests mainly on its cooperation with Ali Aref.

The Ethiopians would be hard pressed to commit their forces to fight in the territory because they are already spread thin fighting insurrections all over the country. The government, however, would make the effort, probably by redeploying troops now fighting rebellions in western Ethiopia. An imminent Somali threat to the FTAI would probably arouse the nationalist fervor of some of the conservative rebels in northern and western Ethiopia; they might agree to suspend their activities, thus freeing troops for use against Somalia.

We believe Somalia will initiate an insurgency campaign in the territory designed to eliminate Aref, drive out the French, and bring a pro-Somali to power. There are indications that Mogadiscio, with some Cuban support, has already

begun to train ethnic Somalis in northern Somalia to infiltrate the territory.

Should a Mogadiscio-backed guerrilla campaign fail, Somalia might try to seize the territory in the belief that a countermove by Addis Ababa would be difficult because of Ethiopia's domestic turmoil. The Somali armed forces would probably not be able to support military operations for more than a few weeks.

The Cubans presumably would not be training Somali guerrillas without Soviet concurrence. This suggests that Moscow intends at least to allow Mogadiscio to support an insurgency. Whether the Soviets would be willing to go along with an overt military move by Mogadiscio is less clear. So far the indications have been that Moscow has restrained Mogadiscio's irredentist aspirations.

France is unlikely to obtain meaningful international guarantees for the territory's independence. The OAU or Arab League might give a paper endorsement, but neither would be able to back up a guarantee. France is unwilling to assume the role of acting as permanent peacekeeper between territorial political factions or between Somalia and Ethiopia. Paris wants to maintain base rights in Djibouti, but probably not at the price of becoming involved in local conflicts.

There is little Arab support for Somalia's claim to the FTAI. Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and North Yemen support an independent territory because they fear annexation by Somalia would result in an expansion of Soviet and perhaps radical Arab influence in the Red Sea area.

African states have accepted as genuine Ethiopia's renunciation of its own claims to the FTAI, but are dubious about Somalia's professed support for independence. This, plus Ethiopia's superior diplomatic maneuvering in OAU meetings, has put Somalia on the defensive. The recent decision of the OAU Liberation Committee to hear Ali Aref was a diplomatic setback for Mogadiscio.